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Neoliberalism and the post-hegemonic war of position: The dialectic between invisibility and visibilities

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Abstract

This article aims to understand the dialectic between the visible and the invisible in relation to the post-hegemonic nature of neoliberalism and the role of mediation in that process. The neoliberal ideological project is geared towards making itself invisible, positioning itself as quintessentially anti-ideological and natural rather than ideological. However, the post-hegemonic status of neoliberalism and capitalism requires its constitutive outsides to struggle for visibility so as to be able to make itself invisible. Mainstream media plays a pivotal role in this regard not only in terms of invisibilizing capitalist interests, but also in terms of providing (negative or positive) visibility to the constitutive outsides of capitalism. Mediation also implicates audiences and publics, who could be approached as an increasingly angry and frustrated Spivakean subaltern, distrustful of democracy and of the media. It is argued that a new democratic imaginary is needed, de-territorialized from the market imaginary and mobilizing the discontented subaltern. The question remains, however, whether it is überhaupt possible to unsettle the post-hegemonic status of the neoliberal ideological project.

Keywords

Democracy, ideology, mediation, neoliberalism, post-hegemony

> Bourgeois ideology [...] is that form of dominative discourse which would present itself entirely innocent of power.
>
> Eagleton (1991: 154)

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Introduction

In this article, the media and journalism are highly relevant, but in a somewhat tangential way. While some media-related evidence will be presented and the centrality of mediation acknowledged, the main question before us is whether the very notion of hegemony in relation to neoliberalism and the capitalist values inherent to it has become so totalizing that it has reached post-hegemonic status.

This post-hegemonic status does not mean that the many available alter-realities are not able to or do not seek visibility through direct action, through the media representations of these actions and through self-mediations and networked technologies (Cammaerts, 2012), but rather that these 'counter-hegemonic' utterances of dissensus either operate from within or at the very least function to strengthen the hegemony of neoliberalism and capitalism, aiding it to reach post-hegemonic status.

If we accept that today the war of position is first and foremost a mediated conflict waged at the symbolic level, but with serious material consequences, a set of observations are of particular importance when we think of the post-hegemonic status of neoliberalism and the dialectic between invisibility and visibility. The first of these relates to the way in which neoliberalism as an ideology has managed to position itself as quintessentially anti-ideological, as a natural state of affairs, as invisible. The second is how the liberal media conceals its ideological bias in favour of the dominant interests in society, while presenting itself as objective and defending citizen interests. The third observation relates to the alternatives to capitalism and neoliberalism, which desperately aim to be as visible as possible, but are subsequently ridiculed, marginalized (i.e. do not reach a broad audience) and end up serving to legitimate the post-hegemonic status of neoliberalism. The final observation relates to subaltern publics – those in whose name 'democratic' decisions are legitimated and protests against these decisions staged and who are positioned in very contradictory ways, as 'citizens', as 'the 99%', and/or as 'consumers'.

Before addressing the dialectic between the invisible and the visible in current political discourse and the role of mediation in that regard, the relationship between democracy, ideology, hegemony and discourse will be theorized.

Democracy, ideology and hegemony

In the field of political science, democracy tends to be defined as an essentially contested concept (Gallie, 1956). From the perspective of discourse theory, we could refer to democracy as an empty – or at the very least a floating – signifier (cf. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In an interview at the University of Sussex (UK) at the end of the 1990s, Derrida (1997) defined democracy as an unfulfilled promise, as a horizon of hitherto unknown possibilities; hence, his notion of *democracy to come* – 'the endless process of improvement and perfectibility, is inscribed in the concept' (p. 5).

The failings of liberal 'representative' democracy to deliver on its promises

When discussing the idea of democracy to come in the 1990s, Derrida was implicitly responding to claims made by Fukuyama (1992) and others that the implosion of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc represented *the* definitive victory of liberal representative

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democracy and the capitalist system it espouses over all other alternatives. However, democracy in the West has, in recent decades at least, not been this ever-receding horizon of the possible. Democracy, it could be argued, has massively failed on its promises; it has not perfected itself, as implied by Derrida's democracy to come. It could even be argued that many of the core-promises intrinsic to democracy and to democratic values, such as: (1) promoting and extending citizen participation and equality; (2) a system of citizen control from below geared towards protecting citizen interests/the collective good; and (3) the civic freedoms to dissent and to contest, enabling renewal (cf. Bobbio, 1987: 42–44), are either in decline, have been repressed or have not materialized at all.

The liberal representative model of democracy has in many Western countries been seen to protect the interests of the few first and foremost to the detriment of those of the many, regardless of which political party or coalition is in power. In this regard, Crouch (2004) argues that we live in a post-democratic age. Liberal democracy, he claims, is merely a shell geared towards protecting capitalism and property rights, rather than citizen interests. This can also be linked to the crisis of liberal representative democracy, perceived to be caused by the widening gap between 'ordinary' citizens and their political representatives and the lack of symmetry between the decisions the latter make in the name of the former and the interests of the former; young people in particular are highly critical of this democratic deficit (Cammaerts et al., 2015; Crozier et al., 1975; Norris, 2011).

A recent audit of the health of democracy in the UK asserted in quite dramatic terms that 'representative democracy is in long-term, terminal decline' (Wilks-Heeg et al., 2012: 16–17). The authors concluded furthermore that, 'the power which large corporations and wealthy individuals now wield on the UK political system is unprecedented' (Wilks-Heeg et al., 2012). In the context of the United States, similar conclusions have been drawn – Bartels (2008), for example, questions whether 'democracy can flourish in the midst of great concentrated wealth', precisely because this 'has pervasive and corrosive effects on political representation and policy making' (p. 284). Marxists would of course argue that this is not a new phenomenon, but it is certainly a debate which now also takes place from within liberal political theory. Neo-pluralists, for example, 'are prepared to concede what conventional pluralists always denied, that business interests occupy a position of special importance compared with other social interests' in a democracy (Dunleavy and O'Leary, 1987: 293).

Linked to this is the way in which democracy is defined and used as an idea and as a practice. Arguably, democracy has been reduced and limited to liberal – and above all to representative – democracy. There are, however, many other more participatory and radical models of democracy out there (see Held, 2006; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). As we defend in this Special Issue, democracy should be much more than the least worst 'method' to select the most apt leaders for a given demos, as implied by Churchill[1] and by those advocating a competitive elitism pitted against the tyranny of the majority (Lippmann, 1925; Schumpeter, 1942 [1973]).

Ideology and 'the real'

Ideology was coined as a concept in the wake of the French revolution, but was popularized above all by Marxist theory and the ensuing critical tradition. Using the Marxist lingo, ideology is constituted at the level of the superstructure which is determined and

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thus juxtaposed to the 'real' material conditions as they present themselves (Marx and Engels, 1846 [1970]: 47). Resulting from this, it was argued, the ruling ideology aligns with the ideas and interests of the dominant elites of that era:

> The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of their dominance. (Marx and Engels, 1846 [1970]: 64)

In Marxism, ideology is thus reduced to bourgeois ideology, geared towards legitimating the unequal and exploitative relationship between the dominant and the subordinate classes. It achieves this by producing invisibles or, to use a Hegelian concept, negations. Ideology, in other words, conceals the real or genuine social contradictions; it normalizes and above all naturalizes class domination and exploitation.

This way of defining ideology as first and foremost bourgeois ideology, as a false consciousness-instilling device fully determined by the material conditions, has been critiqued from within as well as outside of Marxist thinking. In Neo- and Post-Marxist accounts (Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982; Gorz, 1980; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), ideology is articulated in ways that go beyond class-reductionism and is inclusive of other forms of oppression relating to race, gender and sexuality, thereby nuancing the rigid determinism which states that class and the material conditions – i.e. the relations of production – determine the nature of the superstructure.

Neo- and Post-Marxist thinkers gave the cultural, the symbolic and thus also the ideational more agency, de-essentializing it, but they still broadly see ideology in terms of relations of domination and control. Althusser (1971) famously referred to the Lacanian imaginary order to decouple ideology from the supposed 'real' material conditions – 'Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (p. 109). The ideational and ideology itself came to be seen as having materiality too and thus able to shape the material conditions. As Bennett (1982) contended,

> the signifying systems which constitute the sphere of ideology are themselves viewed as the vehicles through which the consciousness of social agents is produced. (p. 51)

This brings us neatly onto the Gramscian concept of hegemony as an important vehicle through which political consciousness is shaped.

From hegemony to post-hegemony

By introducing hegemony, Gramsci aimed to explain the conundrum most Marxists have struggled with at some point or another, namely why do so many people willingly accept their subordinate position and consent to their blatantly obvious exploitation? Gramsci (1971) quite rightly felt that this could not be explained merely by economic determinism, nor by simplistic theories of false consciousness (i.e. 'the stupidity' of the working classes) or by the repressive tactics and brutal force of the bourgeois state. This brought

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him to the Greek concept of the hegemon, understood as: rule by consent through the exertion of moral and intellectual leadership.

Gramsci (1971) pointed out that rule by consent was most effective if and when the domination of the dominant interests in society could be presented as mere common sense – as 'the folklore of philosophy, […] always half-way between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science, and economics of the specialists' (p. 326). Gramsci (ibid) contended that hegemony is particularly powerful and pervasive when it is 'connected to and implicit in practical life' of ordinary people (p. 330). Common sense, furthermore, is articulated as objective truth, as rational, and thus as quintessentially anti-ideological; 'in common sense it is the *realistic*, materialistic elements that predominate' (Gramsci, 1971: 420 – emphasis in original). This resonates with Bourdieu's (1977) conception of Doxa – a situation in which 'the natural and social world appears as self-evident' and inescapable, habitual to stay with Bourdieusian language (p. 164).

Besides this, Gramsci (1971) provided us with another conceptual tool to understand the persisting hegemonic dominance of capitalism and of dominant elites' interests, namely that of the passive revolution – 'a revolution without revolution' (p. 59). In the face of fundamental counter-hegemonic challenges, such as financial crises (cf. 1930s), the bourgeoisie and capitalism will mutate and reconfigure with a view of safeguarding and subsequently reasserting capitalist interests. We could argue that this is also captured by Schumpeter's (1942 [1973]) notion of 'creative destruction'. Passive revolutions produce genuine change and can be the impetus for far reaching transformations, but crucially while at the same time protecting the fundamental interests and hegemony of the property and capital-owning classes. In other words, hegemony is sustained by taking into account and balancing out – to some extent at least – 'the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony will be exercised' (Gramsci, 1971: 161); this with a view to reassert 'the control that was slipping from its grasp' (ibid: 210).

Gramsci was also acutely aware that in Western Europe, where the state and civil society was much more complex and strongly embedded in the fabric of society, it would be near impossible to adopt the same rather blunt 'frontal attack' strategy as the Bolsheviks did in Russia – 'a strategy and tactics altogether more complex and long-term' is required, he lamented (ibid: LXVI). Using the metaphor of war, Gramsci called for a trench-war, a war of position, rather than one of manoeuvre. This war of position was to be a war in opposition to common sense and mainly situated at the level of the cultural and ideational whereby the educational system, the media and civil society should be used to construct and promote a counter-hegemony to capitalism and to the liberal democratic system which sustains and legitimates it.[2]

Gramsci also acknowledged the crucial importance of language in this regard, which he defined as 'a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words and grammatically devoid of content' (ibid: 323). This concurs with our understanding of what discourse is and does. It is not *par accident* that Gramsci and the interplay between hegemony and counter-hegemonies plays such a pivotal role in discourse theory to articulate a radical politics embedded within a democratic framework rather than entirely outside of it (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

Discourse theory, in line with Gramsci, stresses that hegemony is never total. Common sense, Gramsci (1971) stated, 'is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with

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scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life' (p. 326). As a result of this, it is argued, hegemony is not a stable state. In addition to this, Laclau and Mouffe (1985), following Derrida, argue that hegemony is constituted through and feeds-off its antagonisms:

> in order to speak of hegemony […] it is also necessary that the articulation should take place through a confrontation with antagonistic articulatory practices – in other words, that hegemony should emerge in a field criss-crossed by antagonisms and therefore suppose phenomena of equivalence and frontier effects. (pp. 135–136)

Thus, if we were to accept that neoliberalism has no real antagonistic ideological enemy anymore, that it has become truly 'post-hegemonic', that there is no valid constitutive outside or frontier any longer, this would at the same time imply the death of politics and of the political. Hence, the question which poses itself today, is whether there still is a genuine *unterscheidung*[3] when it comes to neoliberalism, capitalist interests and its alternatives in current democratic regimes, and if not, what are the consequences of this? A related question has to do with the precise role of the media and of communication in all this; the war of position has become a mediated war first and foremost, but as pointed out above one with clear material consequences.

The mediated post-hegemonic war of position

While mediation has arguably always been pivotal in terms of waging a war of position, media and communication does not feature much in the work of Marx and most of the Marxist theorists discussed above. Peters (2001: 125 – emphasis in original) for instance, stated that Marx himself 'nowhere discusses *communication* in a sustained way' – and if media and/or communication does appear in Marxist theory, it is in a rather rudimentary fashion as part of a list of actors and/or factors – for example, as one of the Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser, 1971). These accounts, as Thompson (1990) also asserts, do not do justice 'to the centrality of mass communication in modern and political life' (p. 95). In this article the dialectic between the visible and the invisible in relation to the post-hegemonic status of neoliberalism and the role of mediation in that process will be outlined.

First, the way in which neoliberalism positions itself as quintessentially anti-ideological is explained. Second, the role of liberal mainstream media in perpetuating the post-hegemonic status of neoliberalism is discussed. Third, it is argued that strategies of visibility enacted by the alternatives to neoliberalism serve to strengthen the post-hegemonic status of neoliberalism, to subsequently end with some thoughts regarding subaltern publics which are an inherent part of the mediation process.

Neoliberalism as quintessentially anti-ideological?

Neoliberalism is understood here as a worldview that not only advocates a minimalist state, but above all promotes the primacy of the free market, capitalism, property rights and individualism in all walks of life. Neoliberalism can thus be seen as an ideological

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project that not only aims to reduce the power of the state to intervene in or regulate economic and social life, but also as championing values such as excessive greed, widening inequality and individual self-interest (Friedman, 1962; Rand, 1964). As Hallin (2008) pointedly observes, neoliberalism should furthermore be seen as 'a very deliberate effort on the part of the economic elites to turn back the challenges to their power represented by the new social movements' of the 1960s and 1970s (p. 52).

Undoubtedly, what neoliberal ideology has managed to achieve in the last couple of decades is quite remarkable and cunning. First, ideology was strategically emptied of its radical, critical meaning (see discussion above) and now refers to a wide range of belief systems besides dominant/bourgeois ideology. Second, neoliberalism has outfoxed Marxism by adopting a very similar, but reversed, perspective on ideology. To recap, Marxist perspectives on ideology define 'the Other' – that is, bourgeois interests of capital and property – as ideological, as concealing, but considers its own solutions and conceptions of the common good as non-ideological, as relating to the 'real' material conditions. Neoliberalism, I argue, does exactly the same. The neoliberal project positions itself as a post-narrative – as facticity, as non-negotiable and thus as quintessentially anti-ideological (Lash, 2007), while positioning their constitutive Others as deeply ideological, as biased, as mad or nostalgic – of a bygone era. It has in other words naturalized 'itself out of History and into Nature', thereby becoming 'invisible' as an ideology (Hall, 1988: 8).

Referring to Hegel, it could be argued that neoliberalism has negated the negation of the negation. Drawing upon Hegel, Žižek (2008) defines the negation of the negation as 'a victory in defeat: it occurs when one's specific message is accepted as a universal framework, even by the enemy', turning a contingency into a necessity (p. 189). If we accept that the first negation refers to the negation of workers' rights and their means of production by bourgeois society, the second – communist – negation refers to the expropriation of the expropriators (Marx, 1909: 837). Neoliberalism then represents the third negation, negating the second negation.

A good example of this is the way in which so-called Third Way politics[4] and the rejection of ideological fault lines between left and right (Giddens, 1994) was conducive to affirming neoliberalism as post-hegemonic. To further emphasize this point, Peter Mandelson (2008), one of the architects of the UK's New Labour project, famously declared that New Labour was 'intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich'. One of the detrimental results of this alignment with neoliberal values is that today left-wing approaches and solutions are positioned as conservative and reactionary, whereas right-wing solutions taking away rights and privileging the few are presented as the new progressive, as the true way forward. All this points to what Mouffe (2013) has called the 'post-political situation' we find ourselves in. The question this raises, however, is whether this post-political condition is also post-hegemonic, a totality that has become impossible to unsettle or de-territorialize?

Mainstream media in the service of post-hegemonic neoliberalism?

One important way in which the post-hegemonic status of neoliberalism has been achieved is through news and media content production. Overall, it would be fair to

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say that in Western democracies, despite the advent of the Internet and the emergence of notions such as citizen journalism and user-generated content, the production of media content and especially its distribution is predominantly in the hands of a very limited number of private actors (Hesmondhalgh, 2002; McChesney, 2004). In the UK context, the dominant position of News Corp. and the Daily Mail and General Trust plc. in the newspaper industry (together they boast almost a 60% share of the newspaper market[5]) is illustrative of this. Furthermore, News Corp. also owns 40% of BSkyB,[6] which in turn has a market share of 70% in the UK pay-TV market. In other Western democracies, similar patterns of concentration in the media and communication industries can be observed.

This high degree of horizontal – within one industry – as well as vertical – across industries – concentration in terms of media production and distribution of media content did not occur inadvertently (Freedman, 2008). As political economists will point out (Dal Bó, 2006; Foster, 1986), this is the result of well-known capitalist tendencies to establish monopolies or oligopolies and to capture regulatory agencies, which as a result will protect the interests of those they need to regulate. Given the fact that media and communication have always been highly regulated sectors, the concentration of media ownership is a phenomenon that has been actively encouraged by political elites who tend to align themselves with the interests of the owners of these media conglomerates. Media owners have thus consistently yielded their resource power with a view to resist, avoid or reduce regulation, especially when it comes to cross-ownership, but also advertising (Street, 2001).

From a critical and normative perspective, the existence or rather perseverance of such 'monopolies of knowledge', as Innis (1951) described this particular type of capitalist concentration, are seen to be detrimental to the health of a democracy. McChesney (2004) makes this same point when he argues that

> The corporate domination of both the media system and the policy-making process that establishes and sustains it causes serious problems for a functioning democracy and a healthy culture. Media are not the only factor in explaining the woeful state of our democracy, but they are a key factor. (p. 7)

In addition to this, as already alluded to earlier, the media is the prime vehicle through which other products and services are marketed to an audience that is mostly positioned as a consumer and not as a democratic public (Thompson, 1990: 178).

All this inevitably has an impact on the media and the news content that is produced by these media and communication conglomerates. For example, contrary to the traditional watchdog role ascribed to journalism by the liberal normative model and also argued by Curran (2005: 128), globalized capitalist interests and powerful business actors are rarely scrutinized nor held to account by the liberal mainstream media. Recent research into the way journalists and the media organizations they represent reported on economic and financial matters, both before and after the 2008 financial crisis, are illustrative of this (Berry, 2012; Manning, 2012). Even the specialized 'financial media did not act as our antennae and they did not warn us', Manning (2012) concludes; even worse, in the aftermath of the 2008 crash, they consciously choose 'not to vigorously

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investigate and report the information that was emerging from within the financial systems around the world' so as not to jeopardize the capitalist system (p. 187). As will be outlined below, a negative bias can also be observed when it comes to the representation of systemic contestation to and alternatives of capitalism.

Given all this, it is not surprising that many, both from within and from outside the liberal paradigm, argue that rich and affluent elites have a disproportionate influence on democracy and on the media sphere (Crouch, 2004; Domhoff, 2013; McChesney, 2004; Mann, 1986).

The alternatives as constitutive of neoliberal post-hegemony?

It is often argued that 'there is no alternative' to capitalism and neoliberal values.[7] However, there are of course plenty of alternatives to the capitalist mode of production and exchange. For example, many different choices can be made in terms of distributing land, property and wealth, both nationally and internationally; or different models of exchange could be promoted; regulation could be much more stringent and more public interest oriented and so on. In other words, yes, there are plenty of alternatives, but none of them are deemed to be 'realistic' within the neoliberal paradigm – which I will call here: the inside. At the same time, the post-hegemonic status of neoliberalism requires a set of constitutive outsides, that is, its alternatives, to be somewhat visible with a view to labelling them as deeply ideological; and thus unreasonable, irrational or radical.

While from a normative perspective, the democratic role of the media is to be 'responsive to the demands of civil society' (Curran, 2005: 138), it is often argued that media organizations and journalists are negatively biased against those that dissent in a democracy, especially when it concerns systemic and highly disruptive or violent contestations of capitalist interests. This is apparent, for example, in the way in which strikes, industrial conflicts and trade unions or anti-capitalist protesters have been and are portrayed in the UK media (Donson et al., 2004; Glasgow Media Group, 1976/1980; McCurdy, 2012). Dissent and contestations that challenge core capitalist interests, that contest private ownership and the dominant political structures which protect these interests, are granted visibility, but usually in a highly negative way by adopting a derisory inferential tone or by inducing moral panics.

It would, however, be wrong to treat 'the media' and journalists that work within media organizations in an essentialist manner and to consider them all to be docile servants of capitalist interests and the power elite, as some of the Marxist as well as neopluralist accounts of mainstream media seem to suggest. Arguably, a more nuanced perspective is needed in order to make sense of the intricacies of the relationship between ideology, capitalism, and mainstream media in a liberal representative democracy.

We could refer here to Bourdieu (1998) who spoke of a degree of field autonomy for journalism, which is by no means absolute – that is, the journalism field is impacted by other arguably more powerful fields, but neither is relative autonomy totally absent. For sure, dominant neoliberal ideology is eagerly reproduced and disseminated through and by liberal mainstream media (Phelan, 2007), but – in line with a Foucauldian approach – resistance to this prevalent tendency can be observed at times as well, even from within the mainstream. Journalists have to navigate and negotiate many different roles and

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constituencies. They are expected to be independent and critical, but at the same time journalists are political beings and employees of media organizations with distinct editorial lines and ideological positionings (Carpentier, 2005).

In the namen of balance, broadcasters such as the *BBC* and *Channel 4* or newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, all at times provide a platform to dissenting voices that are critical of capitalism and neoliberalism. A recent example in this regard was the British comedian Russell Brands' scathing and controversial attack on representative democracy and on capitalism when he appeared on BBC's Newsnight prior to his guest-editorship of *The New Statesman*.[8] The occasional opinion piece by Žižek published in left-leaning liberal mainstream newspapers can also be seen in this light.

However, many of these critiques from within the liberal media are also somewhat contradictory. Take, for example, the TV programmes of the British political satirist Charlie Brooker. On the one hand, his shows are highly critical of the liberal media and the right-wing values it propagates, but on the other hand they are produced by Endemol, a Dutch production company that also produces Big Brother, which in turn is owned by Berlusconi's Mediaset. In the US, Comedy Central, which produces Jon Stewart's The Daily Show and The Colbert Report, is owned by Viacom, the world's fourth largest media conglomerate active in film and TV production, advertising, distribution and publishing. As the late comedian Bill Hicks once declaimed in a rant against marketing and advertising more generally:

> I know what all the marketing people are thinking right now: 'Oh, you know what Bill is doing right now? He is going for that anti-marketing dollar, that is a good market, he's very smart'.[9]

Systemic critiques of capitalism are thus not completely absent in the mainstream media, but even on a 'public service' broadcaster such as the BBC, '[anti-systemic] accounts tend to appear relatively rarely and/or at the margins of coverage' (Berry, 2012: 268). At the same time, the enduring presence of (some) anti-systemic voices in the mainstream media is above all instrumental to the preservation of the post-hegemonic status of neoliberalism as quintessentially anti-ideological.

I concur here with Miliband Sr. (1969) who argued that 'a monopoly of the means of communication, or the prohibition of expression of all alternative views and opinions' is not necessary to control 'the economic and political systems of advanced capitalism' (p. 64). Indeed, as Miliband pointed out, the control of economic and politics systems by capitalist interests 'may well be better served without such a monopoly', especially as liberty and freedom are *the* core-values of liberalism. The lack of such a monopoly is thus essential in order to preserve the discursive integrity of neoliberalism and is not really an issue as long as the majority of media organizations exert symbolic and ideological control in favour of the interests of the few. As such, Miliband's (1969) words still ring true when he asserted that

> the press may well claim to be *independent* and to fulfill an important watchdog function. What the claim overlooks, however, is the very large fact that it is the Left at which the watchdogs generally bark with most ferocity, and what they are above all protecting is the status quo. (p. 199 – emphasis in original)

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Of course, activists and social movements that challenge neoliberalism and capitalist modes of production and exchange are not only dependent on mainstream media resonance to gain visibility, they have always used all possible media and communication technologies that are at their disposal to communicate their movement frames independently.

Pamphlets, satirical prints, letters, flyers, stickers, buttons, posters, radio, cassettes, video, TV and more recently the Internet have all at some point been appropriated into the self-mediation toolbox of activists and social movements (cf. Cammaerts et al., 2013; Darnton, 1982; Downing et al., 2001; Fanon, 1965; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, 1994). Such communicative technologies in the hands of activists above all serve to disseminate movement frames, but also to construct a positive self-image of the movement, celebrating and thereby self-affirming collective identities and gain respect and support 'from below' (Fraser, 2000: 221).

The main issue in relation to the use of (alternative) movement media remains, however, that they tend to reach micro- rather than mass-audiences and in addition to this, those that are reached through movement media are more likely to be those that are already aligned with the movement's frames, impeding resonance beyond the likeminded (Rucht, 2013). This also brings us to the question of audiences, to the publics in whose name liberal politicians rule and protesters advocate.

The subaltern publics who dare not speak?

If we accept the premise that the post-hegemonic war of position is mainly a mediated war shaped by the dialectic between struggles of invisibility and visibility, it is not enough to only consider the production of symbolic meaning by political and media elites or by activists; we need to include the audience or rather publics as well, that is, those whom producers of meaning aim to reach and above all influence. Mediation, as Silverstone (2006: 42) quite rightly pointed out, is as much about the producers of content as it is about those who receive that content. It relates to what those who receive do with that content and crucially what that content does to those who receive it. In politics and in media studies alike, what we commonly know as the audience has been articulated in a wide variety of ways and varying degrees of agency has been attributed to what we understand the audience to be – from passive and uncritical consumers to active resisting publics.

Regarding the former, we could refer to the original cover of Guy Debord's (1967) *Society of the Spectacle* book. The image was comprised of an audience wearing spectacles, all staring at what we can assume is an early three-dimensional projection. The image exhumes an uncomfortable uniformity; without exception all the subjects in the picture are utterly transfixed by the spectacle, nobody resists, no one dissents – they are willing victims of what Debord called 'the permanent opium war' (ibid: 44). This is reminiscent of the way in which members of the *Frankfurter Schule*, but also Herman and Chomsky (1988), approach the audience; as the subordinate masses, bereft of agency and uncritically swallowing the imperialist and capitalist propaganda that is being fed to them on a daily basis. Also in liberal accounts, we can witness a rather negative inflection towards the masses tied to the classic liberal fear of the tyranny of the majority and of mob rule by 'the bewildered herd', to refer to Walter Lippmann (1925).

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From the 1980s onward, the cultural studies tradition has quite rightly critiqued this culturally pessimistic account of the passive audience. From a culturalist perspective, the audience is attributed much more agency, it is varied and segmented; some accepting and others negotiating or actively resisting mainstream representations (Hall, 1997). Proponents of a cultural studies approach nuanced the rigid domination model by stressing the polysemic nature of media production and emphasizing the importance of potential differences in social positions and contexts between those encoding and those decoding meaning, thereby also opening up a space for negotiation or rejection of meaning. This in combination with cognitive approaches has given rise to notions such as the active audience or even the user of technology, both implying less passive actors (Livingstone, 2013).

However, as argued above, the resistant ideological readings are integral to and become intrinsically constitutive of *the* dominant preferred ideological reading, which aims to remain hidden, thereby confirming its post-hegemonic status, obscuring inherent conflict. This entrenched war of position between the dominant reading, which presents itself as invisible and alternative readings which adopt strategies of 'monstration' (Dayan, 2013), becomes highly problematic if we bring the notion of audiences as publics into the fray.

Despite their various struggles for visibility, the constitutive outsides of neoliberalism and of capitalism are not considered desirable in liberal democracies by large parts of its populations. This inevitably brings us back to the notion of false consciousness. As argued above, false consciousness comes with a lot of historical baggage, but Lukes (2005) made an attempt to save it:

> [unwelcome historical baggage] can be removed if one understands [false consciousness] to refer, not to the arrogant assertion of a privileged access to *truths* presumed unavailable to others, but rather to a cognitive power of considerable significance and scope namely, *the power to mislead.* (p. 149 – emphasis in original)

Lukes acknowledges that false consciousness, understood like this, is never absolute or total. Indeed, many might be perfectly aware of their subordinate position and frustrated about their macro- and micro-exploitation but without therefore wanting or feeling it necessary to do anything about it. As Lukes (2005) contends, echoing Foucault to some extent, 'one can *consent* to power and *resent* the mode of its exercise' (p. 150 – emphasis in original). Along the same lines, Martín-Barbero (1993) argued that 'not every assumption of hegemonic power by the underclass is a sign of submission' (p. 76). This last point could also be related to the very high levels of anger and frustration towards democratic politics and the media by large parts of the population in Western democracies. In 2013, well over two-thirds of European Union citizens did not to trust their national parliament (68%) or government (71%).[10] When it comes to media, similar degrees of distrust can be found; on average, 60% of European citizens do not trust their press.[11]

Approaching the audience as a Spivakean (rather than a Gramscian) subaltern might be fruitful in this regard. Spivak precisely reacted against those that pretended to know the 'true' interests and consciousness of the subaltern and claim to speak in its name. The subaltern, Spivak argued, is not homogenous, but rather a divided heterogeneous incoherent

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entity without a common will, but at the same time a principle of resistance, potentially disruptive and always a present threat to dominant elites, but it is silent too; it ceases to be subaltern (and arguably ceases to be audience) when it dares to speak (Spivak, 1988).

The reality of this threat can be witnessed in way in which some capitalist elites are starting to see the increased inequalities in Western democracies as a danger to the status quo. The focus on inequality as a global risk by the most recent World Economic Forum (WEF, 2014) and a recent speech by International Monetary Fund director Christine Lagarde (2014) warning against the dangers of inequality and ensuing political instability attest to this.

Concluding thoughts

The post-hegemonic war of position is approached here mainly as a mediated discursive war, but with real material consequences for the majority of people across the world, both in the Global South and the Global North. This war of position consists above all in guarding the invisibility of capitalist interests, more so than in silencing, ignoring or distorting the alternatives to it. The post-hegemonic war of position which the neoliberal project wages is primarily geared towards controlling and defining the parameters of what is considered to be sane and rational, what common sense really looks like and crucially what falls outside of these parameters – i.e. its 'constitutive outsides'.

I argue that the post-hegemonic stage we find ourselves in relates to the dialectic between invisibility and visibilities and consists in the ability to make particularistic interests invisible while the alternatives to neoliberalism do all in their power to be or become visible. In line with Lukes' (2005) three-dimensional view of power –'[power] is at its most effective when least observable' (p. 1). From this perspective, neoliberal ideology has been very successful in making itself invisible as an ideology and presenting itself to us as a natural state of affairs, as entirely innocent of power, to refer back to the quote of Eagleton at the outset of this article.

However, this invisibility or negation – to put it in Hegelian terms – is sustained through the struggles of visibility waged by the antagonistic constitutive outsides. While the horizon beyond 'the inside' is often represented as a dark one, as dangerous, as unrealistic or even as crazy and irrational, the constitutive outsides are not ignored or fully closed-down. Liberal mainstream media do not silence critical voices – the discursive nodes of 'freedom' and 'tolerance' are after all pivotal to its core-values and the marketplace of ideas is open to anyone. Systemic critiques are rather neutralized through co-option or by giving them limited degrees of visibility, precisely with a view to delegitimize them as the constitutive 'radical' outside.

It is, however, also too simplistic to assume that those who are on the receiving end of this post-hegemonic war of position between invisibility and visibility as outlined above are somehow drugged by media spectacles to such an extent that they cannot see their own 'real' material interests anymore or only consider self-interest rather than cultivate a sense of community and collectivity. The anger and frustration felt by subaltern publics, young and old, in many European democracies are vigorous but subdued at the same time, it is directed at economic, political and media elites alike, but just like the Spivakean subaltern it dares not speak.

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This discontented subaltern should be mobilized to foster collective solutions and communality, as argued for by Gilbert (2013). In the context of the argument developed in this article, we could refer to the need for more democratic control and oversight, for more genuine pluralism in media and public discourse, and for advocating for an unapologetic renewed politics of redistribution. In order to achieve this, a new 'democracy to come', a new democratic imaginary de-territorialized from the market imaginary, is needed, as also called for by Gramsci in the 1910s. An entirely new state apparatus needs to be constructed, Gramsci (1977) argued, 'which internally will function democratically, that is, will guarantee freedom to all anti-capitalist tendencies and offer them the possibility of forming a proletarian government' (p. 133).

The question remains, however, to which extent this is possible given the post-hegemonic era we live in whereby the struggles for visibility of such re-articulations have become inherently constitutive of the strategies of invisibilization by neoliberalism and capitalist interests.

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Notes

1. In a speech to the UK House of Commons on 11 November 1947, Churchill said that democracy is 'the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time'.
2. Gramsci himself never used the term counter-hegemony, but he certainly implied it.
3. This refers to the work of Carl Schmitt (1996 [1927]) and the distinction between (ideological) enemies and friends.
4. Third Way politics represents to alignment of socialism and/or social democratic politics with liberal and capitalist values. It was put into practice by the likes of Bill Clinton (United States), Tony Blair (United Kingdom) and Gerhard Schröder (Germany). In the United Kingdom, this led to the emergence of New Labour, rejecting its socialist past.
5. See Audit Bureau of Circulation: http://www.abc.org.uk/.
6. See: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/media-policy-planner/idiots-guides/media-plurality-newscorps-bid-for-bskyb/.
7. As famously decried by the late Margaret Thatcher.
8. See URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YR4CseY9pk.
9. Revelations Show, Dominion Theater, London, December 1992.
10. Eurobarometer 79: Public Opinion in the European Union. July 2013: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb79/eb79_first_en.pdf.
11. Eurobarometer 80: Media Use in the European Union. November 2013: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb80/eb80_media_en.pdf.

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